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An Examination of a Four-Way Collaborative to Increase Parental Involvement in the Schools

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Involving families in the schools has become a major focus of professionals, particularly those working with at-risk students (Bermúdez, 1994; Correa, 1989; Walberg, 1984). In order to assess and plan effective interventions for students, particularly language minorities, a collaborative relationship with the families must be established early on in the school process of the child. However, systematic collaboration between the home, the school, and the community is still at a primitive stage of implementation.

Involving business partners in support of educational programs has been productive in extending human and financial resources, in benefiting the school curriculum, and in providing role models to enhance minority student career aspirations. Efforts are no longer local as the number of schools reporting partnerships with businesses nationwide has increased from 17 to 40% since 1983 (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1989). As Cowan (1989) states: "Together...citizens are creating a new understanding of what education means to the community and what the community means to education" (p. 6). Therefore, a sound educational experience for language minorities cannot be expected to happen unless links are established among home, community, and school sources. Grassroots efforts rather than imposition of top-down policies and projects work most effectively.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of a parent involvement program developed as a four-way collaborative effort among an institution of higher education, an urban school district, parents, and the business community. Barriers to parental engagement in the schools are discussed as well as how this collaborative program addresses them.

Review of the Literature

Studies have shown that when parents become involved in school activities, consequential benefits follow, for example: (a) improved academic achievement (Klaus & Gray, 1968; Schaefer, 1972; Walberg, 1984; Henderson, 1989); (b) increased language achievement (Bermúdez & Padrón, 1989, 1990; Henderson & García, 1973; Lindholm, 1987); (c) improved overall school behavior (Levenstein, 1974; Weikart, 1973); (d) sustained achievement gains (Gray & Klaus, 1970); (e) improved parent-child relationships (Henderson, 1989); (f) improved attitudes and interest in science among adolescents (Kremer & Walberg, 1981); (g) gains in parental self-confidence and expertise (Bennet, 1986); (h) improved home-school relations

(Bermúdez & Padrón, 1987b, 1988; Herman & Yeh, 1980; Met, 1987; Morgan, 1982); and (e) increased children's cognitive growth (Irvine, 1979; Radin, 1969, 1972).

Although the benefits of parental involvement are evident to educators, they still lack knowledge about how to reach parents, especially language minority parents. Many educators have misinterpreted parents' lack of participation as a lack of interest in their children's future. However, it is important to examine this issue from the parents' perspective.

Barriers to parental involvement in the schools

Parents' initial apprehension to becoming involved in school activities is generally the result of feelings of low self-worth and alienation from a system that they do not readily understand (Petersen & Warnsby, 1992). Hispanic parents, for example have so much respect for the teacher that they will blame themselves for their children's problems in school, rather than the teacher, the school, or the academic program (Carrasquillo & Carrasquillo, 1979).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families remain alienated from the school system due to a variety of circumstances, including: (a) lack of English language skills, (b) lack of understanding of the home-school partnership, (c) lack of understanding of the school system, (d) lack of confidence, (e) work interference, (f) negative past experiences with schools, and (g) insensitivity and hostility on the part of school personnel. Explanations of these barriers along with relevant research follow:

•Language skills

Inability to understand the language of the school is a major deterrent to the parents who have not achieved English proficiency. Interactions with the schools are difficult, and, therefore, practically nonexistent (Inger, 1992). A majority of Hispanic parents has reported language differences and school attitudes as preventing their involvement (Bauch, 1993). Parents of high school students, for example, have indicated that they want to help their children, but their inability to understand the language of the assignments has kept them from trying (Simich-Dudgeon, 1993).

•The home-school partnership

Teaming with the school is not a tradition of the Hispanic cultures. Historically, education has been perceived as the responsibility of the schools, and parental intervention is viewed as interference with what trained professionals are supposed to do (García, 1990).

•Knowledge of the school system

A great number of low-income Hispanic parents view schools as an incomprehensible system, controlled by individuals who wish to keep them in the dark. Lack of trust is often the result of misunderstanding the perceived intentions of each party. Sending home communications in English only and scheduling meetings at times when parents cannot attend serve to reinforce parental apprehension.

The lack of involvement that results from mistrust and apprehension is often perceived by schools as a lack of concern for the children's education (Inger, 1992). The reality is that these parents are not apathetic or hard to reach, they are simply in need of knowing more about their roles, rights, and responsibilities in the education of their children (Bermúdez & Padrón, 1987b). Clark (1983) reported that parents from low

socioeconomic environments wished to be involved but did not know they had the right to ask for anything special from their children's schools.

•*Self-confidence*

Many Hispanic parents believe that their participation is not essential for schools to perform their jobs as educational institutions, and as a result they separate themselves from the process (Comer, 1986). Parents who treat school personnel as superior or those who feel uncomfortable in the school setting are less likely to be involved than those who have developed a sense of equal partnership (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993). Carrasquillo and Carrasquillo (1979) have reported that some bilingual parents would go to the extreme of blaming themselves when something goes wrong rather than place any blame on teachers. Additionally, perceiving teachers as having higher status than they do (i.e., "teachers can do no wrong" attitudes) creates an unnecessary gulf between homes and schools.

Feeling alienated from the mainstream, these parents develop a negative self-perception, further preventing them from contacting school personnel (Petersen & Warnsby, 1992). These negative perceptions are often reinforced by schools that either overtly or covertly discourage parental participation. In Comer's (1986) words:

Programs that involve parents in the schools can play a major role in creating a desirable context for teaching and learning. However, there are obstacles in the way of parent participation in the schools. Many schools simply don't want parents present, and many parents are reluctant to become involved, as well. Some schools pay lip service to the importance of parent participation but don't give parents the opportunity to play a meaningful role in the life of the school. (p. 444)

•*Work interference*

Work interference remains an obstacle to school participation. Leitch and Tangri (1988) found that work was the major reason stated by parents for noninvolvement in school activities. In addition, parents have reported that when they have time to help their children on weekends usually there is no school work assigned (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

•*Past experiences*

Many non-English speaking parents have had negative experiences of their own, and these memories linger through adulthood (Petersen & Warnsby, 1992). Very likely, these parents have fallen victim to racial and linguistic discrimination by the schools (García, 1990) which has made them become disenchanted with the system.

Negative feelings toward home-school interaction are often reinforced when schools communicate with parents only to share bad news about their children (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986).

•*Attitudes of school personnel*

School personnel's negative or condescending attitudes toward Hispanic parents have caused them to feel disengaged from the schools. Communication with the homes, when it happens, is often judgmental, English-only, filled with educational jargon, or all three.

Without a concerted effort from the school to initiate contact, minority parents will most likely not approach teachers. Apprehension about interacting with school personnel may be attributed to the parents' feeling uncomfortable with such confrontation (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988).

In addition, most educators perceive low-income parents as unable to participate in schools due to the immensity of their life problems (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). As a result, educators are reluctant to initiate and maintain meaningful contact.

Additionally, most parents, regardless of socioeconomic, educational background, or both, have been found to view schools as a vehicle to improve their children's future (NCAS, 1988; Weir, 1986). Nonetheless, parents perceive the school's role as being more important than theirs in imparting education (Bermúdez & Padrón, 1987a; NCAS, 1988).

Although teachers seem to be fairly aware of the significance of parental involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991), a long -range systematic plan is not commonly found in the schools. It takes more than a few enlightened teachers to make the home -school partnership work, as key decisions and financial support are generated by the administrative echelon.

The Parent Resource Center: An Exploration Into Partnerships

One example of a parental training program which has addressed the aforementioned barriers to parent involvement is the Parent Resource Center (PRC) which serves parents from a predominantly Hispanic low-income area located in an urban school setting in Texas. A great percentage of the children who attend that school are on free lunch programs, and most families communicate in Spanish. When offered the opportunity to participate in the PRC program, parents were enthusiastic and appreciative of the experiences provided in the program.

The PRC is funded by a local bank through the University of Houston-Clear Lake, representing a four-way partnership model of school-community-homes-and institutions of higher education working in unison to connect parent and community needs with education and training. The program provides a system of social and educational support for language minority parents. As a result of a prior needs assessment, the target community identified the following priorities: (a) ESL instruction, (b) strategies to help their children at home, (c) understanding the school system, and (d) understanding their rights and responsibilities. In addition, the goals of the university and school personnel were to develop a program which could help overcome the barriers to parental involvement cited previously and make the schools and the parents true partners in education.

How the program works

Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the program. Responsibilities of each collaborator are clearly delineated. The University trains trainers and provides the framework for curriculum evaluation, program content, and evaluation. The school district approves the school site, the schedules, and offers the facilities and janitorial staff hours needed to keep them open. The school provides the administrative support through its principal and the district's parent involvement coordinator housed at the school site. This coordinator was trained through the University of Houston-Clear Lake Parent Education Training Model (Bermúdez & Padrón, 1987b, 1988, 1989) and serves as school-university-parent liaison in charge of recruitment, hiring trainers, and setting up schedules. Two parent trainers conduct the parent classes. They have been trained by university personnel and by the coordinator and are currently revising a teacher handbook developed by

Bermúdez and Padrón (1987a).

A total of 35 parents received instruction twice a week for 12 weeks in English as a second language (ESL) and education -related topics including ways to become more involved, how schools should operate, how to talk to school personnel, what schools expect from them as parents, how to help their children at home, and some basic information about parenting skills.

Upon completion of the program in May, a parent recognition evening honored the parents through awards and certificates. This event was attended by an executive from the sponsoring bank, the school principal, a district administrator, the trainers, university faculty, parents, and their children.

The PRC program was formally evaluated through attendance records and data from a questionnaire administered at the end of the course. Of the 35 students registered, 29 attended regularly, 3 dropped out, and 3 attended at least 50% of the classes. This high attendance record was one indicator of success. In addition, responses on the questionnaires indicated that the majority of the parents felt positive towards the program. One parent's comments reflected the attitudes of many of the other participants in the program: "Es la Mayor oportunidad que tenemos los Latinos" (It is the best opportunity that we Latins have.).

Addressing barriers to parental involvement in the schools

The evaluation of the PRC program also examined its effectiveness in counteracting the barriers to parental involvement discussed earlier in this study. The first of the barriers, lack of English language skills, was addressed by offering ESL classes to the parents. This was also identified by the parents as their priority, indicating that they see the need to develop their English language skills. Some of the parents' comments on that subject included: "Son muy buenas las clases y nos ayudan a comunicarnos con otras personas en inglés" (The classes are very good, and they help us communicate with others in English.); and "Las clases son importantes y útiles para ayudar a los niños en la escuela" (The classes are important and useful to help children at school.). Providing this opportunity to become functional members of their schools and communities enhances parents' perceptions of self-worth. A number of parents indicated their interest in attaining high school diploma equivalencies to be able to improve their lives through the opportunity to pursue college careers.

The second and third barriers, lack of understanding of the school system and lack of understanding of the home-school partnership, can be addressed jointly. The parents who participated in the program not only received ESL instruction, they also were informed as to how schools function, what the schools expect from them as parents, and how to help their children with school work at home, among other topics. The parents demonstrated their leadership and newfound comprehension of the system by drafting a letter to the school board requesting a hearing to offer their suggestions, concerns, and requirements for a new school for their children. They started a petition for new equipment and resources for their children's classrooms and challenged each other in seeking the most signatures. In addition, the parents' responses to the surveys indicated that they were eager to become active participants in their children's learning ("...para ayudar a mis hijos..."). They have not only learned English but also have gained an understanding of the most effective role that parents can play in enhancing their children's career aspirations.

As to addressing the fourth barrier, lack of self-confidence, providing a nonthreatening environment for parents to become acquainted with schools becomes a stepping-stone to higher levels of involvement (Petersen & Warnsby, 1992), which potentially could produce higher levels of self-worth. Most parent participants in the PRC project had self-improvement goals for taking the classes. These ranged from

becoming competent in helping their children with homework, to being able to pursue further studies or attain employment. In general, the questionnaires indicated that parents were motivated to better themselves and to become an integral part of society ("...para poder integrarme a la sociedad de aquí...").

The fifth barrier mentioned earlier in this study is work interference. Time and schedules were decided through the information received in the needs assessment conducted. This minimized barriers conflicting with the participants' work or family schedules. It also allowed for fathers to attend. Child care was made available which provided children with educational experiences as well (e.g., reading to the children or helping them with their school work). The parents' only complaint concerning the scheduling was that the classes were only offered two days a week. When asked what they would change about the program, parents unanimously requested more instructional days per week ("Me gustaría que fueran más días a la semana.").

A great step in overcoming the other two barriers, negative past experiences with schools and insensitivity and hostility on the part of school personnel, occurs in overcoming other barriers (i.e., lack of English language skills, lack of understanding of the school system, and lack of self-confidence). As parents become more self-confident and are able to communicate more effectively with school personnel, the effects of negative past experiences are diminished. The insensitivity and hostility on the part of school personnel are problems which must be addressed with the school personnel themselves. However, the parents' increased participation in school related issues will help teachers see that linguistic minority parents are truly eager to help make the home-school partnership work.

Future plans for the PRC include expanding the program to other school sites through funds provided by other local business and industry sources and expanding the child care program to include systematic and sequenced learning experiences that support school work. Other options include offering classes on Saturdays as well as during the week.

Two success stories: María Angela and Laura

The success of the PRC is due not only to the hard work and dedication of the staff and coordinators but also to the enthusiasm and motivation of the participants. It is important, therefore, to look at some of the individuals who successfully participated in the program, in this case María Angela and Laura, two success stories. María Angela and Laura are not their real names, but they represent two of the many parents whose aspirations have been enhanced by this educational program.

María Angela is in her early thirties and the mother of two boys enrolled in the fourth grade and prekindergarten. She is a beginning ESL student who has encountered tremendous difficulty learning English in spite of her enthusiasm and motivation. María Angela has an impeccable record of attendance in the classes which she supplements by viewing English language TV programs on the educational channel. The following is a translated excerpt of an interview with her:

Learning English helps us overcome the obstacles we encounter in this country. It gives us the opportunity to go to a doctor without having to find an interpreter. This year, I believe we all have learned a little bit of English, although it is difficult to learn it. It is so important that I do not wish to be absent from any of our classes, even though sometimes I must. Look, my children are growing, I need to learn to help my children with their school work. Although I only completed nine years of school in my country [Guatemala], one day I want to go back to school so I can obtain a job. This is my dream. We are very appreciative of all that the program has done for us. We are in this country and we need to communicate with others in their language.

This excerpt dispels several negative stereotypes regarding parents. It evidently shows an interested parent who values the language of the country and who is motivated to work hard to become a productive member of the society by helping her children learn and by seeking future employment.

Laura is in her late twenties. She taught second grade in Mexico for one year before her family moved to Texas for financial reasons. Her previous training has been insufficient in helping her obtain employment in a bilingual classroom because she does not speak English. Laura has three children: a boy in the third grade, a girl in prekindergarten, and a two-year old boy at home. She joined the PRC English classes and has also demonstrated her desire to improve her future and that of her family. The following is a translated explanation about why she wants to learn English:

I want to learn English to be able to teach in this country as soon as all my children are grown and attend school. I am a certified teacher in my own country, but my dream is to learn enough English to attend the university here and become certified to teach in a bilingual classroom. My most important priority now is my children, but learning English is also an important responsibility that I must pursue.

Laura views her role as a parent as being very important, and she is willing to expand her horizons and learn the language that will allow her to pursue higher studies.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties of raising funds to support community / school / home partnership programs, the efforts must continue in light of their beneficial role in increasing parental involvement in the schools. In addition, we conclude that,

1. Schools can not adequately address the issue of educating children without actively involving the parents and home in the process.
2. Barriers to parental involvement in schools must be addressed by planning effective programs (e.g., child care provided, transportation, language barriers).
3. Schools should be encouraged to conduct needs assessments of their community so they can address real, rather than perceived needs of the parents.
4. Programs for parents must combine what universities know about teaching and learning with the immediate needs and experiences of parents as well as school resources.
5. Communities can be helpful in assisting collaboration by providing additional resources and advocacy.
6. Schools must provide ongoing training for teachers to effectively deal with culturally and linguistically diverse parents.

Parents are clearly valuable human resources that schools should not overlook. Efforts to secure and maintain partnerships that will support children's learning must be made to enhance academic success.

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